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Women Fashioning Women Characters

Mitra Phukan

Discussions about writers creating women characters usually centre around male authors. How did Shakespeare create Portia or Lady Macbeth, how did he know the deepest motivations of their psyches, how was he so aware of the inner workings of their minds? How did Tolstoy create the character of Natasha in War and Peace with such stunning verisimilitude? How did Rabindranath Tagore get the character of Charulata, her motivations and her reactions to the world and happenings all around her, so very spot on? How did Birendra Kumar Bhattacharjee, the Gyanpeeth winner from Assam, create the character of the young girl, Mehr, in his unforgettable novel Kobor Aru Phool?

Writing fiction, whether short stories, novels or flash fiction, means that one has to create the microcosm of a world itself. This means that usually male as well as female characters have to be created in order to take the story forward. For the sake of creating that microcosm of the world that can best project the author's vision and take the story forward through interaction of character and incident, both men and women personalities are necessary. IN the interests of the plot and narrative, it may so happen that either gender can be somewhat peripheral. And yet a good writer, whether a man or woman, has to make sure that even these "side" characters are more than cardboard cutouts. They have to be shaded in enough to give them verisimilitude, so that they do not shatter the illusion with a jarring note, or destroy the world that the author is creating so painstakingly, with an unconvincing "tone".

Somewhat surprisingly, though, the reverse is not asked of women writers. How can women create such unforgettable characters as Heathcliff or Indranath? It is never, or hardly ever, asked of them how difficult it was to create these characters. Which, really, is a compliment to their prowess, in a convoluted kind of way! Because it is taken for granted that women can create, in fiction, men and women both, with equal felicity!

It is of course true that till recently, women in general were restricted to the domestic sphere. As a result, the breadth of experience and exposure available to men were denied.

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They could not travel beyond the four walls of the house much, that too, hardly ever alone. Accompanied by men of the family, there was a limit to the kind of exposure they must have had. The opportunity to listen to the different cadences in the talk, the conversations between people of varied social spheres, was possibly missing to them. Chances to even get a first hand impression of the concerns of people of a different social milieu from theirs were limited, except, perhaps through the stories and the conversational rhythms of the help around the house.

But even so, one would think, opportunities for observation itself, were not lacking within these parameters. There were the men, who moved freely from the inner to the outer worlds, and vice versa. Through their stories, their conversations, the world outside was brought within the sheltered domain of the educated, middle class woman of the past. Coloured by their imaginations, these often resulted in poetry rather than fiction, as seen in the beautiful songs of Nalini Bala Devi. Often, but not always, these were devotional in character. They were also effulgent outpourings about the beauties of nature around them.

Gradually, though, as Indian women began to move around more freely, notably during and after the freedom struggle, their exposure to the world around them increased greatly. They could also access it through different media, through papers, books and films, and later, through TV. Even those who, for whatever reason, could not or did not venture out much beyond their immediate environments, could be inspired by these stories and images of the outer world. And today, with so many screens, so many audio visual inputs coming in constantly on all sides, there is really no lack of stimulus for any person who wishes to write, man or woman.

Women such as Nirupama Borgohain and Indira Goswami have had a wealth of experience, quite unlike that of the sheltered women of the past. The women in the latter's characters are often rooted in reality, after, of course, having passed through the lenses of her individual perspective, her point of view, and her core values of humanism. The unforgettable character of Damayanti in her short story "Sanskar" is beautifully layered. There is that of a poverty stricken widow, whose only currency is her beauty, which she uses in order to bring up her children. And yet, even in the depths of her penury and her use of her body, the pride she has in her Brahmin lineage overcomes even her maternal or human feelings, as she destroys the foetus within her womb, because it was sired by someone who was not of the same caste, the same lineage as her. This pride in ancestry is the only thing that, for her, gives her dignity even in the squalor of her surroundings and circumstances.

"Point of View" is a concept that is of great importance in the fashioning of a story. It is one of the important tools that a fiction writer uses. From whose point of view will the narrative move forward? The writer has a theme in mind, sometimes several, which need plot, character and incident in order to establish, and move forward. It is notable that many women writers "speak" through the point of view of a woman character. In "Sanskar", the

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point of view is that of the protagonist, who had to be a woman. But Indira Goswami was too good a writer to make her men into cardboard figures. The character of the rich Mahajan, Pitambar, too, is delineated with empathy.

It is this inevitability of gender that is seen in many stories of the time. Shaped as they are by a stifling social milieu, they are women who nevertheless rise above them, usually, in their own ways, through the internal logic of the different stories. In "Dontal Hatir Uiyey Khowa Howdah" the character of Giribala rebels and rises above her circumstances by showing, finally, that she is in control of her life, and has the right to end it, or not, according to her own wishes, when she simply refuses to come out of the burning hut into which she is made to go in to "purify" her for her various transgressions as a widow. She claims agency for herself when, instead of simply going in momentarily and coming out unscathed, she prefers to immolate herself.

In Arupa Patangia Kalita's novel Felanee, too, the protagonist, in spite of the many bludgeonings she receives from society and fate, refuses to go under. "And Still I Rise", she could be saying as, in spite of all the many horrors she goes through, she still sees beauty in her rural surroundings, and in friendship.

Often, it is seen that the concept of "Point of View" dictates the choice of the gender of the character, whether a protagonist or antagonist or a comparatively minor character. Through whose eyes is the story to be told? Even in the third person mode, there are limitations. Even before the first word is keyed into the computer, there are of course several decisions to be made, a primary one being : through whose eyes will the narrative unfold? This is one of the most important decisions that a fiction writer has to make, for much of the telling of the story depends on this

To give an example from my own work, I would like to mention here the several false starts I had made while writing my novel, "A Monsoon of Music," all of which centred around the choice of "Point of View." With this was also linked the very tone and tenor of the novel. At first I tried a chapter or two through the eyes of Rahul, since, as a non-musician, it would bring, I thought, an objective point of view to this novel about four professional Shastriya Sangeet musicians. But that, I found almost immediately, was a limitation. I then tried it through the point of view of the Guruma, Sandhya Senapati, since her story and that of Namita, her student, are interwoven. But the tone became too sober, because, possibly, her character was such. Finally, I settled on the narrative voice of Namita herself. I don't think the fact that she is a woman had anything much to do with this choice, since my first option was in any case a man, Rahul. It was just that her place in the story, where she has to make several very important choices, stood for the choices that most committed musicians have to make at an early stage of their careers. This was what was more important to me than the gender of the person through whose eyes we see the narrative unfolding. And towards the end, when I wanted to give an important aspect of Guruma's life, I chose the

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device of flashbacks, interspersed with a parallel drama that unfolds in “real time.”

Also, then, there is the question of what the story demands. The narrative itself demands that the protagonist should be of a particular gender. For instance, in my short story “The Choice” (in the collection “A Full Night’s Thievery”) the narrative is a dramatic monologue, told by an unnamed Rudra Veena player, at a critical moment in his life. This very fact of his being a Rudra Veena player, dictated that the protagonist should be a man, because there are very few, if any Rudra Veena players who are women. The decision to make his, the narrative voice, fell into place at that point. And then, just as naturally came the decisions about the form the story should take: a dramatic monologue, related in the first person, with shifts in time.

Indeed, there are several stories in this collection where the central figure is male, though again there are many where there are women at the centre. It is the demands of the story that decide this. And since characters of any gender are fashioned according to the requirements of the story, it is upto the fiction writer to flesh them out, bringing in nuances that are character specific while also bringing in aspects of context, of historicity, of social conditioning and whatever else she feels is important and relevant. It is here that the author’s imagination, that aspect of writing that is of vital importance, comes into play. Creating characters who exist only in the mind of the writer, and fleshing them out so that they become vivid, and lifelike, and are, importantly, instrumental in taking the story forward and are within its context, is one of the greatest challenges that a fiction writer faces. From the interaction between judiciously created and placed characters comes incident and plot. The characters have to be “real”, not as in being realistic, but as in meshing in with the demands and logic of the story.

Actually, I would think, it is not a question of a specific skill that comes into play when a writer fashions a character who is of a different gender than he or she herself is. Ultimately, it comes down to empathy, to having a clear idea in her head of the kind of character she needs to take the story forward.

There are also questions such as getting right the “tone” of the dialogue that each character is given to speak. In this, observation, experience and imagination too come into play. Once again, Indira Goswami’s characters speak in tongues that are absolutely unique. She used the tongue of rural Kamrup for some of her women characters that she situated in satras and villages, thus giving them an earthiness that no translator can replicate in another language. Yet other characters who are educated and comparatively well travelled speak in tones that are more akin to “Standard Assamese”.

Jane Austen whose characters, whether men or women, are all impeccably drawn, never created a scene where there are only men. Always, the perspective is through the eyes of the women. This, it is said, is because she was not familiar with what men might say to each other while alone. Certainly, the times she lived in would not allow for her to study the

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conversations or body language of men when they conversed among themselves. And it is true that even today, when there is nobody of the opposite gender in a gathering, when it is solely either men or women taking part in a conversation or an activity, people do tend to talk “differently”, and body language too is different, than if it was a mixed gathering.

But perhaps, even so, what was true of Jane Austen’s time does not hold not true today, when such strict social mores have changed. Men and women, both, characters are compellingly drawn by women writers. Indira Goswami’s Indranath for instance is painted in many shades.

One aspect about women writers creating women characters is perhaps something that may seem a little odd at first. But closer examination will show that there is truth in this. Women, it can be argued, “understand” women. This is sometimes the difficulty. There are so many motivations, so many nuances, so many stimuli that make women behave as they do. Even from the purely physical point of view, a woman will know and understand, say, the mood swings that may be the result of the protagonist’s menstrual cycles. These complexities can be daunting to portray, and weave into the fabric of the narrative, though of course it is nobody’s case that it has not been done.

The thing about women characters in fiction is that male writers have often been hailed for getting them pitch perfect. It is an amalgam of observation and imagination through which such characters as Somerset Maugham’s Mildred in “Of Human Bondage”, Hardy’s Tess, and so many others were created. And yet when a woman writer creates a memorable female character, she is generally not hailed with so much enthusiasm and wonder. And yet, it takes as much effort to create a memorable character whether the writer is a man or a woman!

As far as my own writings are concerned, again, it is the demands of the narrative that decide whether the protagonist is to be male or female. But I do feel that other things being equal, I do veer towards women and girls as central characters. To take my very first book, a children’s story, “Mamani’s Adventure”, the protagonist could just as easily have been a little boy instead of a six year old girl. The same is true of my second book for the same age group, “Chumki Posts a Letter.” The first describes how a little girl in a tea garden in Assam saves their carefully cultivated sugar cane patch from an elephant. This she does with care and love, offering the elephant, too, a piece of the cane as he retreats. The requirements of the story could just as easily have been met if the protagonist was a boy. But while fashioning the story, I instinctively made the protagonist a little girl, even though she did have a brother, Moina. Was it because I felt an affection towards her, that perhaps I would not have, to Moina? A tenderness, even? Yes, this is stereotyping, but even so, male and female characters evoke different feelings in their creators, depending on their characteristics, of course, but also, I would argue, on their gender.

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Perhaps, also, women writers, quite aware of the struggles that their own gender has to face in our patriarchal society, instinctively move towards women protagonists in their work, as vehicles that will showcase these injustices and aspects. My character Rukmini, the protagonist of “The Collector’s Wife”, had to be a woman. Having the Collector himself as the protagonist would not do, for through him I would only be able to give the official point of view. As his wife, she is placed in a position through whose eyes I could give a wide-angle view of what was happening around her at that time. Through her, I could give the “official” point of view as well as that of the students, since she teaches in a local college. Through her, I could give a picture of what was happening in the town, and in the State around her. In my imagination, and through observation of similarly-placed women in such situations, I fleshed her out as a person, rather than as a symbol merely : her loneliness, her need for companionship, her isolation. As events progress, she evolves, displaying a grit in her personal as well as public life that she did not have in the beginning.

Actually, and to reiterate, good writings transcend gender restrictions. It is as difficult, I would think, for a woman writer to create a convincing, unforgettable character, whether